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The Ben Barka Fester

By Ray Alan

SECTION XIV: Scandals and "affaires."

. . . 4) PR procedure.

a.) If police or special services involved.

Phase one: Clam up, clamp down. Phase two: Blame the Americans (or British). Phase three: Blame the press. Phase four: Sit tight while the public becomes bored and forgets the whole thing.

PARIS

THERE ARE times when one is tempted to suspect that some such procedure is outlined in the manual of *Instructions officielles* issued to senior French officials. It was a routine of the Fourth Republic; it is still resorted to under the Fifth. The Ben Barka affair has provided what might be a textbook example of the technique.

Mehdi Ben Barka was the leader of a vaguely Left-wing Moroccan political party, the "National Union of Popular Forces." A few minutes after noon on October, 29, 1965, he was accosted in the center of Paris by two men who identified themselves as policemen and asked him to go with them. He stepped into their car and was driven away. He has not been seen or heard from since by anyone friendly to him. Had he not been accompanied by a Moroccan student, whom the policemen seem to have ignored, even the circumstances of his kidnapping might have remained obscure. As it happened, the student was able to alert Ben Barka's brother Abdel-Kader who contacted the police and informed the press.

During the next few weeks it was learned that the two policemen had handed Ben Barka to a gangster named Georges Boucheseiche who held him prisoner until General Mohammad Oufkir, the Moroccan Minister of the Interior, arrived in Paris to take him over. The coordinator of the operation appears to have been a government employe named Antoine Lopez, an agent of the SDECE (*Service de documentation extérieure et de contre-espionnage*), a secret service concerned with certain aspects of France's foreign relations but independent of, and mistrusted by, the services of the Quai d'Orsay. (SDECE men organized the succesful counter-coup in Gabon and the unsuccessful coup in Guinea and are said to have played a part in bringing together opponents of Kwame Nkrumah.) Boucheseiche and his associates were prosperous men with good political and police contacts in both Paris and Rabat; in the 1950s they were employed by the French police and *barbouzes* (official strong-arm squads) against political undesirables, and made a killing, on the side, swindling Europeans in North Africa who wished to transfer capital to France or Switzerland.

Most of the gang left Paris soon after Ben Barka's disappearance, but one man, the neurotic Georges Figon, stayed behind, alternately boasting of the influence of the Gaullist deputy, Pierre Lemarchand, whom he claimed to be his "protector," and threatening to sell his story to the press if the organizers of the kidnapping failed to pay him his due.

Figon had taken an active part in two earlier attempts to murder Ben Barka, was in this plot from the start, and met the deputy Lemarchand soon after the kidnapping. Later he contacted journalist acquaintances and even posed for a photo outside police headquarters. He claimed to have seen Oufkir torturing Ben Barka. But it was two months before the police made any serious effort to apprehend him, and the results of such other inquiries as were made during November were hushed up. The natural inclination of French officialdom to put

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wraps on the affair was reinforced by electoral considerations. If the public had known last December what has since been revealed about the comportment of certain official services and Gaullist personalities General de Gaulle might not have been re-elected President of the Republic.

PHASE TWO was opened on December 22, 1956, by General de Gaulle's Minister of Justice, Jean Foyer. Asked by a delegation of the France-Maghreb committee why the police were not making a more energetic effort to get to the bottom of the Ben Barka affair, he replied in approximately these words: "It is a delicate business. The General wishes it handled with care. There are indications that American secret services were behind the kidnapping."

Foyer may have jumped the gun. This line was not adopted by other ministers until mid-January. On January 17, 1966, the Paris police had been given the address at which Figon was hiding. Forced to act, they went about their task (in the words of a distinguished group of lawyers) "with a deployment of forces sufficient to alarm even the most inoffensive of citizens." They found Figon dead, shot behind the ear. With suspect haste, the *Procureur* decided overnight that Figon had shot himself, and the dossier was closed. But rumor insisted that the bullethole was bigger than it ought to have been, if produced by the weapon found beside Figon's body. A friend of the dead man announced that Figon had told him that if ever he committed suicide he would shoot himself through the palate. Frenchmen were reminded of other timely suicides in their recent history.

With scandal spreading like a brushfire, some diversion was desperately needed. On January 21, Roger Frey, the Minister of the Interior, informed a group of "leftish Gaullists" at the home of François Mauriac, the Catholic novelist and publicist, that he could now confirm that the Americans were behind the Ben Barka affair. Premier Pompidou admitted to receptive journalists that all was not well with the SDECE (the secret service involved) and he added that the Americans had undoubtedly succeeded in infiltrating it.

The first publicist of note to enlighten public opinion on this point was François Mauriac. He had performed a similar service in November 1960, after Gaullist officials had expressed disquiet over the popular-

MOHAMMAD OUFKIR

ity of President-elect Kennedy in France. On that occasion, in a passage so often quoted that anthologists already have their eyes on it, he wrote:

"Do not let us forget that in 1944 the Americans coldly crushed and pulverized our villages, our churches. They could have spared them. . . . Have you observed carefully the face of their new President? His famous charm impresses me less than his powerful jaws, his slightly slanted eyes beneath their heavy lids, and his strong voracious teeth. The day he judged it necessary to strike, he would strike, do not doubt. Not that, in my opinion, we are in any danger [from him] so long as, in Paris, two stars shine on a sleeve [that of General de Gaulle]."

On January 27, 1966, in his column in the weekly *Figaro Littéraire,* Mauriac wrote:

"Shortly after or shortly before the murder of Ben Barka (I forget the exact date) a well-informed Moroccan friend spoke to me of General Oufkir's close ties with the American secret services. . . . For once these American services have brought off a magnificent double success — against the Afro-Asian world, in getting rid of Ben Barka, and against de Gaulle. If the Americans are innocent in this affair, then the devil must have been acting for them."

This was aimed at an "intellectual" readership — which is as cruel a reflexion as one could make on the intellectual condition of de Gaulle's France. The logical leaps imposed on the less sophisticated browsers of *Paris-Match* a few days later by "Major X, a former SDECE officer," were more engaging:

"General Oufkir promised [the kidnappers] 50 million francs but was unable to pay. . . . Lopez was in touch with the U.S. Narcotics Bureau . . . as were the two policemen [Raymond] Voitot and [Louis] Souchon. Lopez claims to have warned Le Roy [his SDECE chief] of what was being plotted last May; one may assume that he also tipped off the U.S. Narcotics Bureau which would immediately alert the CIA which still maintains a training-center, guarded by Polish mercenaries and Alsatian dogs, and officially known as U.S. Base 313, at Poteau, in the Landes. . . . Ben Barka was notoriously pro-Chinese. . . . It is not unthinkable that while the Americans took care to play no direct part in the neutralization of Ben Barka, an event they wished to bring about, they provided the funds without which the operation could not have succeeded. Five hundred million are said to have been promised,

and 40 million actually paid. It can be assumed that most of this sum was paid — discreetly — in dollars."

UP TO a year ago almost the entire French press, from *Le Monde* down, would have leaped on these "revelations" with glee. Only a year ago, when the Quai d'Orsay was having one of its periodic bouts of concern and affection for Syria and Lebanon, *Le Monde* obliged with an editorial assertion that it was Winston Churchill who ordered the bombardment of Damascus (by the French Army!) in 1945. But this time *Le Monde* was not playing, and even the anti-American *Canard Enchaîné* mocked official efforts to implicate the U.S. Far from chasing the government's red herring, the liveliest papers set about disentangling the chains of command and complicity that connected Ben Barka's kidnappers with the secret services and the Gaullist political hierarchy.

There was no lack of insiders — and ex-insiders — willing to talk. In their years of intrigue against the Fourth Republic, and the purges and vendettas of the first few years of the Fifth, the Gaullists had given many hostages to fortune. The secret services had been split into Left-wing and Right-wing factions by the appointments of successive governments. (One of the early directors of the SDECE, Henri Ribière, for example, was a Socialist. After writing a report severely criticizing his Gaullist predecessor, he was involved in a serious road-accident. Before dying he told his parents that the accident had been arranged so as to liquidate him.)

Thus the press was able to establish that Antoine Lopez was a conscientious agent whose reports (responsible for the capture of Ben Bella and his companions in 1956) were taken seriously; that Lopez had warned his SDECE superiors as long ago as May 17, 1965, that Oufkir was plotting to seize Ben Barka, and on September 29, 1965, had given some details and the names of those involved; and that the channel of communication along which Lopez's information was passed led to Jacques Foccart, a veteran Gaullist strategist and "network" organizer, who since 1958 has been coordinator of the main security services and personal adviser of the President. Lopez's only political contacts were two UNR (Gaullist party) personalities: Lemarchand and Carcassonne-Leduc, both collaborators of Foccart's and organizers of semi-secret Gaullist activist "networks" which still exist, now financed by the state.

Lemarchand, whom Figon claimed to be his "protector," would have made a splendid Ian Fleming character. In 1961-62, acting on the orders of Roger Frey, Minister of the Interior, and under cover of the Gaullist *Mouvement pour la Communauté,* he organized official anti-OAS terrorist squads in Algeria. When these squads had outlived their usefulness, their 20 or so leaders were called to a meeting in an Algiers villa. They were all devoted Gaullists, but (unlike the rank and file, who were mainly mercenaries recruited from the underworld and the police) they knew too much about the Administration's responsibility for a number of killings and bomb explosions which a future, more liberal, French government might decide to investigate one day. During the meeting a big crate, supposedly containing printing equipment sent to the villa by Lemarchand, exploded, killing most of those present. One of Lemarchand's rewards for his many services rendered was a seat in the National Assembly as UNR deputy for the department of Yonne. To facilitate his election his principal opponent was arrested nine days before the poll.

The press also discovered that General Oufkir had been a SDECE informant, and still exchanged information and services with it occasionally; and that, on November 3, 1965, in Paris, his guests at dinner included two senior members of the personal cabinet of Roger Frey — although the fact that Oufkir had personally taken delivery of the kidnapped Ben Barka four days earlier was known not only to the police and the SDECE but to Frey and (as Frey himself revealed to Mauriac and his friends on January 21) to General de Gaulle. Frey is a close friend of the colorful Lemarchand, who passed on to him Figon's account of the kidnapping on November 2. Frey has since admitted—privately — that on November 2 he also knew the names of the two French policemen who had helped Ben Barka's kidnappers. Yet on November 12 he was still denying — in an official communiqué — that French policemen were involved.

Blaming the Americans having proved fruitless, it was decided, at an exalted level, to put as much blame as possible on the press. The press is a favorite scapegoat of French governments. As a writer in *Le Monde* observed recently, "Everyone knows that it is the press which provokes scandals by reporting them, loses wars by demoralizing the nation, and endangers national unity by criticizing the government." In the classic currency-trafficking scandal of 1953, in which the usual mishmash of senior officials, politicians, secret agents and gangsters were involved, the only man against whom the law moved at all vigorously was the journalist who wrote a book exposing it all; and during France's embroilments in Indochina and North Africa far more journalists were punished for denouncing the use of torture than torturers for applying it. General de Gaulle's strictures, during his last TV address, on the role of the press in the current scandal aroused echoes of Guy Mollet in the 1950s and Henri Queuille in the 1940s.

The French press has rarely attained inspiring heights of probity. Few Paris dailies are self-supporting; most provincial papers are dis-

mally conformist; government subsidization is the rule and the only permitted press agency is the official AFP. But a few Paris weeklies are commendably vigorous, and in the Ben Barka affair their vigor shamed normally sluggish dailies into action. The press came as near as it could to filling the gap in the nation's life caused by the government's emasculation of parliament, radio and TV.

Phase four ("Sit tight . . .") then opened. Three senior officials who were either investigating the affair or involved in it developed mysterious illnesses. One, at least, was a secret illness: "We are not at liberty to reveal the nature of his illness," said a SDECE official when asked about the health of M. Morvan, two steps above Lopez in the SDECE hierarchy, who fell ill the day the Ben Barka scandal broke. Marcel Le Roy (also known as "Colonel Finville"), Lopez's immediate superior, was arrested but fell back on his SDECE secrecy oath. Louis Zollinger, the examining magistrate, closed his inquiry and handed his dossier to the *parquet* (public prosecutor's office) in what *Le Monde* called "an atmosphere of renunciation and resignation." The affair was already drifting out of public focus.

THE FRENCH often strike one as having extraordinarily short memories for political matters. (I write this diffidently, aware that I dismiss all such generalizations as stupid when other people make them. Can it be that the strongly nationalistic bias of French education stimulates a subconscious urge to forget political events of an unflattering nature?) Whatever the explanation, few Frenchmen have any clear recollection of even such recent and resounding scandals as the *trafic des piastres* (1953), the *affaire Dides* (1954), the bazooka murder plot (1957), the *Algérie française* and Gaullist conspiracies of 1958, the beatings and killings of North Africans by the Paris police in 1960-61, and the rest. Who, apart from Mme. Audin, remembers that the parachutist officer who tortured to death Maurice Audin, a university professor, on June 21, 1957, is still unpunished? No civil court in France can handle the case; and the officer's chief, one of the men who brought de Gaulle to power, is now a five-star general. Who remembers the kidnapping of Colonel Antoine Argoud by Gaullist agents in Munich just three years ago — in circumstances similar to the kidnapping of Ben Barka? Will anyone remember Mehdi Ben Barka in even one year's time?

Perhaps. At the end of April, in one of those sudden decisive moves that revive one's trust in the French judicial machine just as one is despairing of it, the *chambre d'accusation* of the Paris court of appeal ordered that the inquiry be reopened. This initiative was taken — despite the opposition of the *parquet* —in response to a petition from the legal representatives of Abdel-Kadar Ben Barka. Among the new witnesses to be heard will be a waitress, a former employe of the gangster Boucheseiche, who claims to have seen Souchon, one of the policemen who kidnapped Mehdi Ben Barka, and a senior police officer named André Simbille dining with Boucheseiche at his home. Both Souchon and Simbille told Judge Zollinger, during his first inquiry, that they had never met Boucheseiche. At the beginning of May, after receiving an anonymous telephone call, the police began searching for Ben Barka's body in an area of marshland and ponds favored by Boucheseiche for fishing parties.

There has been a slight revival of public interest in the affair, but many Frenchmen are still convinced that the authorities will never allow the full story to be told. Antoine Lopez and his chief, Marcel Le Roy, are in prison, but it is generally assumed in Paris that they are still on the payroll of the SDECE and carefully obeying orders. Blown secret-service men who wish to stay alive rarely have any other option. It is thought that these two officers will reveal just enough of what they know to implicate themselves and insure that inquiries can decently be halted at Le Roy's level of responsibility. They will be imprisoned for a short while, paid off, and allowed to retire to some modest but agreeable backwater.

General de Gaulle himself suggested this formula when his secret-service chief, André Dewavrin ("Colonel Passy"), founder of the SDECE was accused of embezzling official funds in 1945-46. The leading bazooka plotters are now sunning themselves in the Balearic islands. The refuge for heads of the Gaullist *barbouze* squads who get themselves "burnt" (the French term) is said to be in Bolivia. Figon was waiting for Lemarchand to obtain papers allowing him to go to Bolivia when the police finally closed in on him. By an intriguing coincidence, France's present Ambassador to Bolivia, Michele Ponchardier, was in 1962 the liaison between the SDECE and Lemarchand's *barbouze* set-up.

For the man in the street, the affair is above all an advertisement of General de Gaulle's failure to eradicate the kind of corruption and intrigue his spokesmen denounced so extravagantly in the days of the Fourth Republic. The more reputable Gaullists dreamed of building a clean new France. But they employed too many dirty hands and too much shoddy material; they overthrew *le Système* (the Racket), as they called the Fourth Republic, only to establish *la République des barbouzes* (the goon squads' Republic) — a *Canard Enchaîné* headline that has become a national catch-phrase. The dream is now ending, and the Ben Barka affair has contributed to the awakening. Ben Barka may never have a tombstone but the founders of the Sixth Republic should raise a small monument to him.